

condos

# The down side of a city that just keeps growing up

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Some might see quaint and charming, but when Richard Witt looks at his old-fashioned High Park home, he sees red.

“I hate the poorly constructed, outdated house that I live in that constantly needs to be fixed,” he said. Mr. Witt, an architect with Raw Architects and Designers, would like nothing more than to move back into a loft apartment from his pre-marriage days. Call it a common architect's dilemma: Peter Clewes, an architect with architectsAlliance, lives in a 20th-century Beaches home, but longs for a downtown condo in one of the sleekly modern buildings that he likes to design.

“The problem,” he says, “is that the downtown core, where a lot of tall buildings are being constructed, is not an area I would want to live in. It is not an issue of height and density, but of neighbourhood quality.”

High rises are sprouting up across the city: In September, 132 new high-rise buildings were under construction in the city – almost 50 more than our nearest North American competitors, Mexico City, according to a recent survey by the German-based company Emporis. Once characterized by urban sprawl, the pace at which Toronto is morphing from a horizontal city to a vertically stacked one has left some critics arguing that the construction is random, with insufficient thought given to long-term planning.

“It is being forced upon us with some very deliberate external policies,” Mr. Clewes told a crowd gathered Wednesday night for a panel discussion called “How Tall Is Too Tall?” at the Harbourfront Centre. The Greenbelt legislation introduced by Dalton McGuinty's Liberals in 2005, he argued, is one of the reasons behind the increased densification of Toronto's downtown core. The legislation, which Mr. Clewes says encourages urban planners to be “smart about our growth,” protects nearly 1.8-million acres (over 700,000 hectares) of farmland and forest. It was meant to put the brakes on urban expansion, which has already swallowed swaths of prize agricultural land around the GTA.

Now, he says, based on the province's Places to Grow policy, the city will have to find a way to house an additional 1.5-million by 2020. He speculates, based on housing demand, that most of the residents will likely end up living in the downtown core, bounded by Spadina Avenue to the west, Sherbourne Street to the east, Bloor Street to the north and Lake Ontario to the south, although the inner suburbs also will see some vertical development.

Before the situation gets out of hand, many architects and urban planners are saying it's high time we gave this scenario some critical consideration. For one thing, many feel the city's vibrant street culture would be lost in the race to build taller towers.

“Toronto is in danger of losing too much of its urban fabric,” said Roberta Brandes Gratz, a New

York-based award-winning journalist who writes for the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. “A concentration of single-purpose residential towers, even if beautifully designed, is the suburbs in reverse.” While the Emporis figures do not distinguish between residential and commercial development, it seems that most of these new buildings are designed as condos.

She argues that Toronto needs more mixed-income and mixed-use towers built to a medium-rise height. In conjunction with local mom-and-pop stores, she says, this will encourage a vibrant street culture with residents engaging with their neighbourhoods.

Another caution is that, particularly in lower-income areas, high rises can morph into “towers of poverty.” Susan McIsaac, president and chief executive officer of United Way Toronto, argues for mixed-income, mixed-use development, although her concerns are slightly different than Ms. Gratz’s.

The group’s 2011 report, *Vertical Poverty*, found that, in 1981, one out of every three low-income families in the City of Toronto rented a unit in a high-rise building. By 2006, this had increased to 43 per cent.